

East of Ego: The Intersection of Narcissistic Personality and Buddhist Practice

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ABSTRACT: This article explores the intersection of clinical narcissism and Buddhist meditation practice. Through the lens of Otto Kernberg and Heinz Kohut's theories of narcissism, the article investigates the many facets of Eastern spiritual practice when undertaken by a narcissistic practitioner. In particular, questions are raised regarding the potential psychological dangers of pursuing meditation practice when suffering from clinical narcissism. Potential applications for a cross-pollination of psychoanalytic support and Buddhist practice are also considered for the narcissistic patient and/or spiritual practitioner.

KEY WORDS: narcissism; Buddhism; meditation; Kohut; Kernberg.

When psychological structures interface with the spiritual realm, new possibilities for healing and harm come our way. An important and arcane dance between the unconscious labyrinth of the psyche and the malleable sphere of the divine has begun. What transpires takes place on a spectrum from life-changing potential for psychic awakening to a further entrenchment of suffering and relational dysfunction. What is experienced on this broad spectrum of possibility, is determined by the particular spiritual teachers, psychoanalysts and internal resources available to each spiritual practitioner.

With growing interest in the relationship between Eastern and Western approaches to psychological healing, an evolving body of literature has begun to address the intersection of spiritual practice and psychoanalysis. Increasing

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numbers of psychotherapists and psychiatrists are encouraging their clients to incorporate meditation and spiritual pursuits as another facet of the healing process. It is becoming evident to many therapists across disciplines and training that psychoanalysis and/or pharmaceutical support alone, often fails to alleviate the difficulties that drive people to seek therapeutic intervention. This is a hopeful change in the realm of psychological healing, but it represents only a nascent stage in the evolution of this complex integration.

For those psychotherapists who have concurrently developed their own spiritual practice and explorations, the many intricate facets of the psycho-spiritual relationship inspire a strong interest in better understanding what happens when people bring their intricate histories and psychological inner-workings to spirituality. What transpires can be a funhouse of psychological systems taking on the added complexity of relationship with the divine. For some, there are sufficient resources and self-awareness to negotiate this funhouse. In learning to calm the mind and explore our many human travails with compassion, life can become more joyful, less emotionally taut as an expanding sense of possibility replaces chronic feelings of smallness and unimportance. For others, this added dimension can exacerbate the difficulties they experience in the world of mere mortals. Spirituality is no safe-house—just as in the realm of sentient beings, the spiritual world is a place ripe for projection, grandiosity and a sense of finally being spared the unpredictable chaos of human relationship.

My intention is not to debunk the value of spiritual practice. There is ample and compelling evidence to affirm the far-reaching benefits of meditation for both analysts and analysands as they attempt to find means to happier and more rewarding lives (Rubin, 1996; Bennett-Goleman, 2001). As an analyst in training and practitioner of Vipassana meditation and Kadampa Buddhism, it is this very integration of Eastern and Western psychological healing that has drawn me into the profession. I look forward to a time when there is a stronger professional reliance between these two contrasting traditions. My intention, rather, is to explore the impact of Eastern spiritual practice on those practitioners who bring with them a particular set of intra-psycho challenges as they are presented on the spectrum of neurotic and pathological narcissism.

While there are many Buddhist psychoanalysts who challenge the veracity of *pathology* as a legitimate and useful diagnostic category, in order to fully explore contrasting theories of narcissism I will identify those theorists who differentiate between healthy, relational narcissism and pathological narcissism. Rather than attempt to disprove the usefulness of pathological narcissism as a theoretical construct, I will instead investigate degrees of narcissism as they manifest in spiritual practice. My objective is to explore the impact of Buddhist spiritual practice on the continuum of healthy relational narcissism to the narcissistic symptomology presented by those with borderline personality condition. In so doing, I hope to underscore that what is healing and

restorative for one spiritual practitioner can leave another far less able to access the rumblings of a troubled unconscious.

In their investigations into the narcissistic psyche, Heinz Kohut and Otto Kernberg came to some agreement regarding common symptomology amidst their contrasting theories and analytic approaches. They found that narcissistic analysands were unusually self-referential while expressing a limited capacity for genuine interest in others. They often presented a highly inflated self-concept alongside an exceptional need for admiration and love. Serious deficiencies in the ability to love existed alongside chronic doubt about their basic worth and effectiveness (Kernberg, 1975). They were frequently high functioning socially and professionally but spoke of feelings of emptiness, unmanageable anxiety and a salient lack of empathy for themselves and the people in their lives.

Throughout their literature, Kohut and Kernberg agree fundamentally that neurotic degrees of investment in the *self* thwart the ability to connect meaningfully with others. A life of isolation, despite extensive contact with others professionally and even within the context of a marriage and family, is the usual result. While this clinical reference to the *self*, may cause some confusion in Buddhist thought where the self is more illusory and less constant than is generally characterized in clinical theory, there is a basic compatibility between clinical and Buddhist understanding of self that will serve as the foundation for all references to self in the following pages.

From Kohut's perspective, the self can be referred to as "an independent center of initiative and perception...with our experience that our body and mind form a unit in space and a continuum in time"(Kohut, 1977). Buddhist teaching states that the self exists "in the sense that this particular configuration that is "me" has a momentary reality of its own in the ongoing flux of change and transformation" (Safran, 2003, p. 76). Both Kohut and Jack Engler, psychotherapist and Buddhist scholar, evoke a foundational self that serves to claim a unique presence equipped with unique perception. The self exists in both traditions, requiring care and attention. While there are wildly divergent theories on the nature and experience of self between these two traditions, this basic commonality may help clarify the particular spiritual pitfalls I will address in the narcissistic condition.

For Kohut, the roots of clinical narcissism are found in the fixation or libidinal investment of an early developmental stage with the *primitive*, or *grandiose self*. Buddhist teaching subtly references the presence of this primitive self in its recommendation that only children over the age of 7 be considered for rigorous monastic training. The theory suggests that until a superego has developed, or some integrated sense of morality that is not predicated on the exclusive needs and desires of the grandiose self, a younger child cannot understand a spiritual practice based on serving others. In both traditions, there is a clear evolution of self that over time begins to incorporate a larger *not-me* world into the self-concept.

Kohut suggested that for some, there is an interruption in the normal development of self-experience where this primitive self stagnates, and becomes ensnared as the locus of the psyche. The child is unable to build a bridge between their grandiosity and their realistic struggles or limitations. Just so, they are unable to integrate the parent's many positive qualities alongside their human frailty. Through his use of *empathic intunement*, Kohut aimed to help the narcissistic personality rebuild a stronger internal connection to a more integrated self. He sought to facilitate more mature forms of narcissism, where a healthy, more reality-based investment in the self could be used to effectively interact with others. In the course of analysis, Kohut sought to reactivate the thwarted needs of the self in childhood in order to facilitate a healthier reliance on the self-object resources in their adult world (Kohut, 1977, p. 77). He wrote with much sensitivity about his efforts to help his patients strengthen a sense of *self-coherence*, which Kohut believed had been disturbed by empathic deprivations in the first years of life. This coherence of self would allow for a more harmonious relationship between the good and bad parental and self-objects.

In contrast, Kernberg proposed that narcissism results from a libidinal investment in a flawed, or pathological self-structure, where internalized parental objects have become distorted by projected rage and envy. Kernberg found that high functioning but cold and covertly aggressive caretakers featured prominently in the early experience of narcissistic patients. Thus, profound thwarting in the areas of love and hate were the bedrock of the narcissistic psychological structure (Kernberg, 1975, p. 234). For Kernberg, the use of clinical empathy, while an important tool, if used exclusively only reinforced the many pathological defense mechanisms employed by narcissists, who cultivate lives that prevent the resurfacing of repressed rage and envy. He contended that Kohut's efforts to remain empathically attuned to his analysands, would prevent the necessary resurfacing of this unprocessed rage at the original caretaker and merely enable a fossilized grandiosity (p. 187).

Kohut's efforts to bolster his patient's ability to integrate and rely upon others through a skillful empathic attunement, however, may suggest a certain reverence for the human potential for healing. From a Buddhist perspective, it would seem that Kohut recognized the camouflaged gem or *precious human life* in his patients, despite their destructive impulses and non-relational behavior. Kohut seemed attracted to the idea of inherent well-being or wisdom. This perspective evokes the Buddha's belief that our *wisdom mind*, or *Buddha nature* composes our most repressed core self. When we struggle in the psychological realm, according to Buddhist teaching, it is not because we are lacking in inherent resources but because we have so deeply camouflaged the very insight and wisdom that defines human consciousness.

With this Buddhist framework in mind, it's both provocative and worthwhile to consider Kernberg's theories of narcissistic personality condition, where he suggests that the basic narcissistic structure is faulty or damaged.

In contemplating Kernberg's perspective, I have found myself envisioning his desired curative methods, attempting to understand what is to be done clinically for those deemed inherently flawed. He was, after all, unlike Kohut, willing and able to work clinically with people suffering from Borderline Personality Disorder, a severe form of narcissism. Somewhere in the midst of his medical model was a belief in the impact of psychoanalysis on the human psyche, regardless of the damage inflicted on the particular psychic structure he encountered. For the psyche, unlike a cancerous organ, cannot be extracted. An important question therefore arises regarding his motivation for identifying a pathological root at the core of a narcissistic foundation.

When a given entity within a working system is deemed toxic or unable to adapt to an otherwise functional system, there is a degree of seriousness involved that often instigates fervent and immediate action. Whether it is a toxic person within an otherwise functional group, or a ruptured blood vessel within a living, breathing body, action is necessary to keep the larger body viable. This seriousness of purposes, I believe, is what inspired Kernberg to address the narcissistic personality condition with extreme and at times a cool and clinical terminology. As I will explore in the following pages, a vigorous support and intervention is called for when narcissistic personality finds a home in Buddhist practice.

There is an insidious quality to narcissistic self-protection. Unlike people suffering from psychosis and overt forms of schizophrenia, the narcissistic personality is often accompanied by fluid and refined personality. Intellect, professional acumen and artistic sensibility are not uncommon in the realm of narcissism. Intra-psychoic struggles, however, can leave the narcissistic person feeling bereft of meaning, parasitic in their need for affirmation, and haunted by a pervasive sense of unreality (Kernberg, 1975, p. 215). The very mechanisms used to manage these distressing states, I propose, can be easily incorporated into the more malleable sphere of spirituality, where divine beings are less apt to challenge the narcissist than their fellow humans, whose own needs for recognition and affirmation will forever impinge upon the narcissist's desire for ultimate importance, power and safety.

Both Kernberg and Kohut address several key protective measures that compose the narcissistic defense apparatus. Primary amongst these symptoms are *splitting*, *omnipotence*, *devaluation*, *projective identification* and *primitive idealization*. These defense mechanisms protect the narcissist from further interpersonal and intra-psychoic suffering that results from a frail, weakened ego. Unfortunately, these very defenses also prevent the necessary psychological healing process from taking place. The use of splitting, where internalized parental and self-representations are split into all good and all bad objects, allows the narcissist to bypass the normal tension of reconciling the good and the bad within one person. This use of splitting is applied to the self, whereby feelings of profound inferiority and unworthiness are not integrated into a more reality based sense of one's talents and potential. Instead, the

neurotic and pathological narcissist must protect feelings of grandiosity and omnipotent power through a chronic devaluation of others. A radar detection for the limitations and ineptitude of others, particularly for those who might offer help and support, becomes a prominent defense. This steady investment in feelings of grandiosity spares the narcissist the terror unconsciously associated with *dependency*, where the core wounding in the realm of love and aggression would invariably surface.

It is this pervasive fear of dependency enshrouded by grandiosity that is central to the intersection of Eastern spiritual practice and narcissistic personality structure. In his writing on narcissism, Kernberg describes a fusion that takes place in the narcissistic psyche between some remnants of the real self, which often include special talents and attributes; the ideal self, including fantasies of an all-powerful, most beautiful and gifted being; and the ideal parent, whose capacity for love, generosity and acceptance is steadfast and generative (p. 265). This fusion of idealized self and external object representations spares the narcissist from reconciling the normal tension that exists between our fantasy self-images, parental images and the reality of care received alongside the limitations of endowed talents and potential. Most importantly, it keeps the narcissist enshrouded in a fantasy that prevents these realities of self and other from ever disrupting the frail ego and its masterfully constructed psychic nesting.

When such a person first begins their exploration of spiritual practice, there is a probable chain of intra-psychic reactions. By nature of having found Buddhist practice, the neophyte practitioner will typically be told that the good merit they have generated in previous lifetimes has allowed them to discover these sacred and profound teachings. For practitioners with hidden grandiosity in dynamic relationship with the devaluation of others, this first sense of being inculcated into a special and select group can reinforce a feeling of being better than the benighted secularists in their family and professional lives. By nature of their attraction to the many arcane Buddhist teachings, the narcissist can use even the dharma of Buddhist teachings, which ultimately is based on the capacity to cherish others as we cherish ourselves, as a means to reinforce a fusion of grandiose self with idealized other. For some, the idealized other will be played by the lama/teacher, whose gifts of insight, capacity for ascetic living, and endless reservoirs of patience fit well with the internal idealized parental images.

For others, no lama or teacher with their invariable human shortcomings will suffice. They will quickly identify a given teacher's shortcomings - their tendency to make bad jokes, or obvious struggles with overeating—and soon dismiss them as inadequate sources of wisdom. The idealized other can then be projected onto the Buddha, who the practitioner is told, has transcended all feelings of anger, pain and suffering. The Buddha has no problems, for they have seen through our delusions of attachment and aversion, and transformed the four *maras*, or *major obstacles* into fodder for greater insight (Chodron,

1997). When the narcissistic practitioner begins exploring meditations in which they are encouraged to visualize Buddhas entering through their crown chakra, and ultimately becoming a Buddha, a Kernbergian fusion can take place with conscious and unconscious impact.

In Buddhist teaching students are encouraged to go for refuge to the *three jewels*: Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. The concept of going for refuge can be a first introduction into the healing relationship between humility and safety. Practitioners are not asked to submit to the will of the Buddha, who is depicted as more of a spiritual guide than a God (Safran, p. 103). Instead, the Buddhist lama or teacher will instruct and encourage students to explore wisdom minds and clear seeing through the example of the Buddhas (enlightened beings), the insight of the Dharma (teachings), and the support of the Sangha (community). What is encouraged is a simple willingness to investigate happier modes of living that prevent the suffering that can result from a life composed of alternating attachments and aversion. Students are instructed in the benefits of cultivating strong feelings of concern and affection for all beings, regardless of the apparent closeness or neutrality of the relationship.

While these concepts are often elusive, and not easily taken to heart, the process of repeatedly surrendering to a teaching predicated on caring for others as we care for the self, can reveal a remarkable link between dependency or taking refuge and healing potential. For those who are able to cultivate and maintain substantive and mature relationship with others, this experience of refuge amidst training in more positive and expansive approaches to life, can offer strength and fortitude in their secular lives. With stronger ego integration, there is an augmented feeling of possibility for experiencing more positive mental states. For in such a practitioner, the capacity to make use of available resources—teachers, spiritual community, meditation and study—without splitting off from the ongoing challenge of secular life is more developed.

But for the practitioner who is not able to build meaningful and sustainable interpersonal relationship, going for refuge can be an invitation to move even more dramatically away from the fraught difficulty of human relationship and into the realm of the divine. When Buddhist practice thus becomes an escape from the relational world, meditation can become an insidious opportunity for the very fusion of idealized self and external objects Kernberg describes in the narcissistic analysis.

When a narcissistic Buddhist practitioner finds themselves engaging in meditations that hold the Buddha as an object of focus, there is ample opportunity to enact a fusion of the practitioner's real insight or "specialness," his/her idealized self-object who is more insightful, more enlightened and less focused on the banal issues of secular life than his friends/family, and their image of the Buddha, who by its very nature is an idealized object. The Buddhas, after all, are beyond the emotional messiness of human life. Having

become enlightened, they see through the clouds of ignorance, attachment and anger, which are identified as the three primary sources of suffering. The Buddhas, are thus depicted as playful, placid, filled with great compassion for all precious human life and eternally patient with the human tendency to revert back to a life dominated by suffering.

It is reasonable to suggest that even for the well-integrated Buddhist practitioner who can tolerate consciousness of their many human shortcomings alongside a realistic commitment to evolving their spirituality, temporary feelings of grandiosity can easily be reinforced in the meditation practice. This is one of the spiritual pitfalls well known to spiritually attuned psychoanalysts. The Buddha, dharma and sangha, can become a mirror for our idealized self-images, where the reality of our human struggle is temporarily camouflaged as we commune with enlightened beings. However, for the practitioner whose self/object integration allows for a foundation of humility, these fleeting experiences of divine wisdom are well tempered by the consciousness of behaviors that generate their own suffering.

The integrated practitioner who does not suffer from severe narcissism is able to use Buddhist practice to strengthen peaceful behaviors and attitudes while continuing to honestly explore those behaviors that are clearly not the product of an enlightened being. An authentic mindfulness evolves, allowing practitioners to observe without judgment their full spectrum of experiences, feelings and actions. This growing capacity for mindfulness or *friendly curiosity* is particularly healing when applied to the very complexes and neurotic behaviors that typically cause overwhelming feelings of aversion. Mindfulness practice becomes a way to weave in a compassionate self-exploration that allows us to explore more fully the unattractive fears and challenges that are distinctly unpleasant to reconcile (Hanh, 2001). In this way, Buddhist practice can become a remarkable asset to the psychoanalytic process, helping analysts find safer and more manageable ways to explore their primary psychological hindrance.

When a narcissistic practitioner interfaces with spiritual practice, however, this bedrock of humility in combination with loving feelings toward the self may not exist. The presence of a powerful split can prevent such a practitioner from either noting their desire to fuse with representations of enlightenment, or exploring with sensitivity the very behaviors that confirm their humanness. Instead, such a practitioner can utilize the very real intelligence and insight they are endowed with to support their experience of condensation with enlightened beings. This can then lead to a desire to submerge oneself in the Buddhist community where there is support for a life unfettered by the mundane concerns of the secular world. Just as psychoanalysis can sometimes breed clinical lifers whose only relational comfort is experienced in the confines of the therapist's office, spiritual practitioners can attempt to crawl into a womb of spirituality.

Worse yet, it can breed a self-imposed isolation for the practitioner whose relational deficits make contact with fellow sangha members and teachers

unpleasant and frightening. For such a practitioner, the fusion with enlightened beings leaves little room for the influence of lamas or Buddhist teachers who might help intervene with this unconscious tendency. In such a case, the Buddhas become a satellite that reinforces unconscious grandiosity. Rather than being in dynamic relationship with the many Buddhas, an extreme projective identification can take place upping the ante in the realm of idealized self/object fusion.

If such a Buddhist practitioner were in treatment with an analyst who understood the spectrum of subtle and overt spiritual pitfalls, an important opportunity would arise to investigate the analysand's motivation for pursuing spiritual practice. The issue of motivation in all healing methodologies is an essential inroad to the conscious and unconscious expectations of the patient/seeker. Just as in psychoanalysis where there may be an unconscious motivation to be fixed, or cured, and thus more perfect and powerful than others, spiritual practice can be sought as a means to expunge humanness. The motivation is not to work through behaviors and complexes that generate suffering in order to have a fuller life with increased capacity for loving and authentic human interaction. Instead, the unconscious motivation of the narcissist for seeking spiritual practice can underscore the entrenched desire to achieve spectacular, superhuman insight and thus, protection from the dreaded fear of re-wounding.

Given that all Buddhist traditions emphasize the integral link between our intention or motivation and our ensuing actions, Buddhist teachers might use this arena to help identify practitioners who are in need of additional psychological support (Safran, p. 303). Simply asking basic questions regarding one's motivation for learning about meditation could be a key step in the necessary intervention of narcissistic practitioners.

For the practitioner who was excessively involved in the narcissistic world of the primary caretaker during an early developmental stage, a sense of being endowed with special insight may be central to their core identity (Kernberg, 1975, p. 276). These early life experiences can fuel the grandiose self with profoundly distorted expectations of knowing more, and having far keener insight than others. When these grandiose roots take hold in the psyche, access to humility as a motivation for any healing process is unlikely. The motivation to reinforce a sense of *specialness* and anomalous insight can be the primary factor in both psychoanalytic work and spiritual practice. Nonetheless, the chances of identifying and exploring this motivation are greatly increased if the narcissistic spiritual practitioner is in treatment with an analyst for whom spiritual practice is a multifaceted process with great potential for healing *and* harm. Or, as mentioned above, if they have the good fortune to work with a spiritual teacher with sensitivity to psychological underpinnings.

Kohut proposed that within the psychoanalytic process, the analyst's inevitable failures to remain empathically attuned to the analysand allow a

necessary working through of the archaic merger or fusion between the narcissist and analyst. These unavoidable empathic failures are acknowledged by the analyst and serve as an essential part of the healing process. Much like Winnicott's (1971) description of the *good enough* mother who reinforces the infant's evolving recognition of others—or merely of a *not-me* world—through the mother's temporary parental shortcomings, the good enough therapist startles the narcissistic personality into awareness that others are not merely satellite constellations who serve to perfectly mirror the needs, wishes and fantasies of the analysand. A growing sense of other emerges, and the archaic fusion is slowly replaced by a more mature empathic bond that serves as a model for learning to tolerate hateful and loving feelings for the same person (Kohut, 1977, p. 66).

This ability to bring into contact fantasy images of self/other with the reality of our flawed humanness is one of the primary goals of an effective analysis. Learning to hold the tension between adoration and anger toward the therapist can offer the analysand real tools for learning to love the self in all its shortcomings and relational challenges. For the narcissistic practitioner who is not in psychoanalytic treatment, there is limited opportunity for intervention with a merger bond between the practitioner and enlightened beings who do not actively frustrate the seeker with their invariable human shortcomings. The Buddhas can serve as a perfect mirror for the seeker who is conscious of only their most idealized qualities. They can feel perfectly cared for by the Buddha's capacity to completely cherish and value the practitioner. The Buddha is not a *good enough* source of spiritual support—they are beyond limitation with an infinite capacity for love and attention.

But can this fusion of idealized self and spiritual other be sustained? I believe it can and for lengthy periods of time. Thus, there are practitioners whose personal lives outside their spiritual endeavors remain sadly impoverished even as they are revered for their spiritual devotion within a given sangha. However, when something disastrous transpires—when jobs are suddenly lost without warning, when children are diagnosed with life-threatening or demoralizing conditions, or when a host of natural and man-made catastrophes rock the fragile ego core of the spiritual seeker, the idealized Buddha or lama projections can be shattered beyond repair. The Buddha or lama, in such a situation, may suddenly morph in the eyes of the narcissist, into a callous, persecutory parental object that even takes pleasure from the practitioner's unbearable suffering.

It is during such crises that many narcissistic spiritualists lose their interest in going for refuge. They experience a sense of being back out in the cold, where all people, even so-called enlightened beings are not to be trusted. The devastation they've suffered is personal in nature, happening to them because they have been identified as being singularly unlovable or worthy of care. A profound rage and resentment can facilitate a categorical loss of interest in and commitment to their faith tradition. When this dramatic loss of faith

transpires, it is a hugely unfortunate turn of events. For just as there is genuine cause for lament when an analysand leaves psychoanalytic treatment prematurely, perhaps just as they were about to access the core ego wounds that lead them to psychoanalytic intervention, it is a great loss when someone who has been playing out central complexes in the spiritual realm leaves their practice before it has offered them the authentic healing potential of Buddhist teachings and practice.

Central amongst the many lost opportunities, is the ability to cultivate the commingling of humility and a deeply rooted commitment to the well-being of the self. Despite the illusive, moment to moment quality of the self in Buddhist teaching, all great teachers including the Dalai Lama forever remind their students that the self, the sense of having a unique “me” at the core, is precious and worthy of constant care. When cultivated, this ability to care for the self is then applied to others whose own unique sense of “me” is understood as precious human life, or Buddha nature. Interestingly, it is this very relationship of self-care amidst a genuine concern for others that is at the heart of the healing process for the narcissistic personality. It paves the way for a fuller life populated with people who have a similar capacity for this essential reciprocity of attention and care.

Before this healing process can take place, however, there is yet another psychic hurdle to be negotiated. If subject to the unexpected and disorienting vicissitudes of life, anger is likely to be a dominant emotion in the narcissistic meditator. There will be anger for having been made so vulnerable to pain and suffering, despite their depth of commitment to spiritual practice and the great sacrifices of time, energy and money. There is likely to be a seething and unconscious rage that despite their extraordinary gifts and unusual insight, they were not spared the humiliation of a major life setback. Just as there is typically a bedrock of unconscious rage toward the primary caretaker, the Buddhist practitioner suffering from entrenched narcissism, will likely experience a squelched rage toward the Buddhas and teachers for having failed to offer the absolute protection they sought in their spiritual endeavors.

It is these very feelings of anger and aggression that would be worked through in an effective psychoanalytic treatment. In so doing, the analysand would be faced with the dissonance between their conscious idealizations of self/other, and the reality of how they were cared for. Thus, the psychic bubble protecting the idealized parental and self-images would burst, allowing in the presence of new oxygen that allows the analysand to begin exploring life with access to a fuller and richer spectrum of feeling about themselves and the world they inhabit.

For the spiritual practitioner who suffers some unexpected difficulty and is not in treatment, the feelings of anger that surface can feel by their very nature, decidedly un-Buddhist. Anger (or aversion), alongside attachment and ignorance, is identified in Buddhist teachings as one of the *three poisons*. Feelings of anger are said to suggest a delusional perspective, where we have

likely attributed to the person or situation that angers us, some inherent quality that is generating the feelings that arise from our own hearts and minds. When we invest this inherent meaning in externals—people and circumstance—we have forgotten that all form is empty of inherent meaning. This is the basis for the central teaching of emptiness, or *sunyata*. It has great ameliorative potential for helping people explore their own internal states, rather than indulging the temptation to unconsciously project their own feelings onto others.

In the Vipassana or mindfulness tradition, the goal is to explore and take note of all feelings without judgment. In this tradition it is taught that there is no real difference between pleasure and pain—they both arise from our own minds and they are both transient states. There is room for practitioners to acknowledge a full range of feeling, including anger without fear that they have left the spiritual realm. In other traditions that place a stronger emphasis on achieving enlightenment, there is a more pronounced tendency to encourage students to question feelings of anger. And while there is logic to this questioning that ultimately can be of immense relational support, there is a tendency for students in these particular Buddhist traditions unconsciously to split off from unseemly feelings of aggression and aversion. Even if the Western lama patiently reminds his/her students that they are not endorsing the *repression* of anger, but a thorough and honest investigation of its genuine source, a dissociation from invariable feelings of anger will likely result. This tendency is underscored in the narcissistic practitioner and is well managed until life shakes up the repressed anger and has it floating to the psychic surface in asphyxiating surges.

In both psychoanalytic and Buddhist teaching, anger ranks high on the list of negative emotions. It is not pleasurable to experience anger, and it has an incendiary quality that typically generates a great deal of suffering. Buddhist teaching suggests that when we suffer, we have the opportunity to practice the basic spiritual tool of compassion (Chodron, 1997). We start with ourselves, acknowledging with tenderness the pain we are feeling, and over time we learn to do this with others. This training is intended to help people learn not to run from pain and suffering, but to stay with the full spectrum of difficult feeling and bring a curiosity and compassionate attention to every nuance of feeling experienced. This is an essential part of Buddhist practice, which helps the student learn to be a more conscious observer to the full range of our lived experience. In so doing, there is opportunity to work through the many self-defeating behaviors we cultivate in order to distract us from feelings that are deemed too painful or shameful to consciously endure.

But remaining conscious during experiences that elicit powerful feelings of anger, which can in turn induce unmanageable shame, requires an ego that has already successfully integrated feelings of love and anger toward the self, or self-experience. For the narcissist, the ego fragmentation at play does not allow feelings of anger, pain or shame to commingle with genuine feelings of

compassion. The anger will thus cancel out the tenderness they have been training in throughout their spiritual study, leaving them thrust back into a state where *emptiness* is experienced as a vast and cold world devoid of meaning.

It is for this reason that Buddhist explorations of anger call for a greater understanding of Western psychology. Unconsciously triggered anger, for many spiritual practitioners, can be either a catalyst for achieving new depths of insight into the relational self, or conversely can be the lynchpin that undoes a person's capacity for faith. For the practitioner whose unconscious anger leaves them feeling an exacerbated sense of unreality that many analysts associate with emptiness, there is the very real danger that the Buddhist concept of emptiness can take on a dramatically distorted and destructive meaning.

Emptiness, or *sunyata*, is a foundational Buddhist teaching that identifies our mind states, or perception as the primary determinant of all experience. The purpose of this teaching is to underscore that all circumstance, people, opportunity, etc. lack existence that is independent from our perception. The student of Buddhism is consistently encouraged to shift their focus from the *perceived* to the *perceiver*. In doing so, emptiness helps practitioners cultivate a stronger wish to develop more peaceful mental states when they have come to believe that indeed, no external person or circumstance is ever responsible for feelings and thoughts that arise from our own minds/hearts. This is the fundamental meaning of emptiness, and ultimately is a means to develop an authentic compassion for people regardless of their direct impact on our lives. An advanced practitioner who has done the difficult work of integrating this teaching into their lived experience, will find decreased reason to get lost in feelings of disappointment, blame and frustration. Instead, a stable internal experience of curiosity and peace begins to become the medium through which such people interact with all experiences, regardless of the challenges they may bring.

Sunyata, is thus a decidedly different experience than the feeling state of emptiness described by many people suffering from clinical narcissism. For such people, a sense of walking through life on autopilot can take over. Blurred boundaries between self and other can facilitate a sense of merging with their environment, so that life, the self and others lacks a sharp and dynamic focus. If these experiences generate unmanageable discomfort, myriad addictive behaviors are likely to be added into the repertoire of coping mechanisms. This is the world of emptiness for the narcissist whose unprocessed and unconscious aggression wipes out the nuances of a vibrant psychic landscape.

When this deadening sense of reality takes hold, the Buddhist concept of *sunyata* can easily be translated into a feeling that nothing has meaning—including human relationship. Sadly, unless such a person were interacting with either a psychoanalytically attuned Buddhist teacher or a

psychotherapist who understood the important differences between *sunyata* and the narcissistic experience of emptiness, there would be no one present to underscore the mistranslation. This rift of understanding can therefore be yet another vortex into which the capacity to care for self and other is lost.

The teaching of *sunyata* is ultimately in service to the Buddhist belief that human life is precious—a remarkable opportunity to heal the mind and to help others. This concept of emptiness aims at reminding the practitioner that no external circumstance or person is ever to blame for our own suffering. Its primary objective is to incite a steadfast compassion and commitment to the well-being of all. Furthermore, it serves as a reminder that if we are suffering it is probable that we have lost sight of the importance of others and instead, have likely resorted to the self-protective mechanism of blame.

Gather all blame into one. This saying of the Mahayana tradition is used as a reminder that in the midst of suffering it is prudent to begin exploring the contents of our own minds/hearts (Chodron, 1997, p. 80). However, this teaching is an effective tool only if the exploration into one's own suffering is eased by the presence of compassion for the self. This is the very foundation of Buddhist practice—to develop compassion for our own suffering and the suffering of others (Safran, p. 301). But how does the clinical narcissist learn to access compassion for their own suffering, if they are locked in a war between unconscious anger and a growing belief that life lacks meaning? Who helps such a person use their spiritual study to begin the painful process of excavating old and entrenched rage toward the people who may not have offered them the care they needed as dependent youth? Who helps them feel anchored to a world that is not populated exclusively with persecutory or idealized figures who either seek to destroy or offer perfect protection from pain?

If it is reasonable to suggest that both psychoanalysis and Buddhism have the shared goal of alleviating human suffering, then perhaps there is opportunity for these two healing traditions to express a more authentic curiosity for the fallout of narcissism in the spiritual realm. In this cultural climate where increasing numbers of people are expressing interest in both spiritual endeavors and psychoanalysis, there is a genuine need for both psychoanalysts who respect and appreciate the depth and intricacy of the spiritual world, alongside spiritual teachers who do not dismiss the healing potential and need their students may have for psychoanalytic support. In this way, psychoanalysts can develop a fuller *analytic* approach to the intersection of psychological structure and spiritual practice. Similarly, Buddhist teachers can practice the teaching of *friendly curiosity* toward the endless nuances of clinical work with spiritual practitioners.

Until this humble curiosity transpires in both traditions, there are growing numbers of people who will not only miss the healing potential of their spiritual explorations, but who will suffer needlessly due to the limited dialogue that is prevalent between these two paradigms. There is at present a gap between these traditions that is filled in part with a quiet cynicism and

unconsciously competitive spirit. It's not uncommon to hear Buddhist teachers dismiss psychotherapy as ineffectual and irrelevant to core human struggles. Similarly, the hubris and disinterest toward all things spiritual of the psychoanalytic community is historical and sadly prevalent.

Freud rightly suggested that religious pursuits *can* result from a defense against anger and aggressive drives. This is one of the primary pitfalls of spiritual exploration that is not supported by the psychoanalytic process. But he lost sight of his invaluable tool of evenly hovering attention in suggesting that *all* spiritual endeavors can be reduced to infantile enmeshment and dependence upon idealized parental images (Safran, 331). When neurosis and ego fragmentation are not dominant in the psyche, spiritual practice can indeed alleviate many forms and layers of human suffering. Furthermore, when the normally developing ego has been harmed in early life, the spiritual pitfalls that are likely to ensnare such a person can become a critical source of psychological healing if there is nuanced clinical support available. Perhaps if Freud had lived into another generation of psychoanalytic thought, he would have acknowledged that it is decidedly unanalytic to reduce a vast realm of ancient Eastern experience, teaching and history to one dogmatic Western theory. The difficulty, as the teaching of *sunyata* suggests, is not inherent to the Buddhist experience, but in the relationship between one person's psyche as it interfaces with the spiritual world.

What is called for in order to address the many complexities of this relationship is not a fusion of psychoanalysis and spirituality. Instead, there is a far-reaching need for each tradition to implement the depth of its respective commitment to healing and utilize Freud's evenly hovering attention alongside the Buddha's friendly curiosity. Perhaps in so doing, Buddhist teachers will begin to develop a keener interest in issues of the psyche as well as the soul. If they can engage fully with their capacity for humble, compassionate action by referring students of spiritual practice who may be struggling with profound intra-psyche duress to spiritually attuned psychotherapists, they will play an important role in strengthening a mutually supportive approach to healing.

People who suffer from narcissism have a dangerously limited ability to ask for help when it is needed. They will rely on the wisdom of their teachers and their analysts to affirm their right to seek additional support without feeling entombed by shame. The narcissist who embarks on a spiritual path and is able to share this process in psychoanalysis, is offering their analyst many invaluable inroads to the wounded ego. To dismiss these endeavors in any way is to look away from a person who is suffering and who has found an additional realm of potential healing that cannot be successfully managed alone.

The Buddha believed that to be curious, to train in dissolving all assumptions and strongly held beliefs, was the best use of human life (Chodron, 1997, 17). The Buddha, it would appear, was calling for a willingness to be curious about any new means to offer healing that is relevant and useful to the untold

means through which humans might suffer. Similarly, there is a genuine and growing need for psychoanalysts to begin exploring with greater depth the many facets of spirituality as it impacts on the psyche. As scores of Westerners seek to heal the fragile ego through an Eastern and Western dialectic, the time has arrived for healers in both traditions to participate more fully in this movement toward a burgeoning psycho-spiritual approach to psychological health and spiritual well-being.

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